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ABSTRACT

This lesson plan complements study of plot and characterization in "Romeo and Juliet' by focusing on Shakespeare's use of lyric forms and conventions to spotlight moments in the drama and thereby heightens the impact of the action on the stage. Students look first at the sonnet in which Romeo and Juliet meet, analyzing the imagery to gain insight into the way Shakespeare's use of love sonnet conventions characterizes the moment and the relationship between the lovers. Then students act the passage to notice how Shakespeare stage manages this moment and consider what perspective his making the lovers almost literally "kiss by the book" lends to readers' perception of their characters. Finally, students enact the scene in which this moment occurs in order to notice how Shakespeare combines poetic forms, ranging from the almost-prose of Capulet and the Nurse to the melodramatic style of Tybalt, to achieve something akin to the cuts and framing that are possible in film. To conclude, students work in groups to find similar moments in the play (e.g., the balcony scene, the tomb scene, etc.) where Shakespeare spotlights the action through lyric form and at the same time invites the audience to see through the idealization of lyric conventions by having the characters act out these conceits on stage. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (9-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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"You Kiss by the Book": Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet [Lesson Plan].

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"You Kiss by the Book": Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

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Lesson Plans

SEARCH EDSITEMENT

Introduction

This lesson plan complements study of plot and characterization in *Romeo and Juliet* by focusing on Shakespeare's use of lyric forms and conventions to spotlight moments in the drama and thereby heighten the impact of the action on the stage. Students look first at the sonnet in which Romeo and Juliet meet, analyzing the imagery to gain insight into the way Shakespeare's use of love sonnet conventions characterizes the moment and the relationship between the lovers. Then students act the passage to notice how Shakespeare stage manages this moment, and consider what perspective his making the lovers almost literally "kiss by the book" lends to our perception of their characters. Finally, students enact the scene in which this moment occurs, in order to notice how Shakespeare combines poetic forms, ranging from the almost-prose of Capulet and the Nurse to the melodramatic style of Tybalt, to achieve something akin to the cuts and framing that are possible in film. To conclude, students work in groups to find similar moments in the play (e.g., the balcony scene, the tomb scene, etc.) where Shakespeare spotlights the action through lyric form and at the same time invites us to see through the idealization of lyric conventions by having the characters act out these conceits on stage.

Literature: British

Literature: Drama

Literature: Poetry

9-12

One to two class periods

reading literary texts
critical analysis
literary interpretation
historical interpretation
drawing inferences and comparisons
Internet skills

Learning Objectives

(1) To learn about Shakespeare's use of poetic conventions as a principle of dramatic structure in *Romeo and Juliet;* (2) To examine the first meeting between Romeo and Juliet as an enactment of figurative language in a context of competing poetic styles; (3) To explore the use of poetic forms to impart perspective in later episodes of the play; (4) To gain experience in close reading and the interpretation of verse structure and imagery.

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and

Lesson Plan

1 Begin this lesson by having students turn to the first meeting between Romeo and Juliet at the Capulet ball, in Act I, Scene 5 (lines 95-112 in the Signet edition). For a text of the play,

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visit the **Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet** website on EDSITEment, which provides links to several complete editions. (At the homepage of Mr. William Shakespeare, click on "Works" in the menu at the left, then scroll down and click on "Complete Plays" for an electronic edition prepared by Robert Hanson; click on "Romeo and Juliet" in the lefthand frame for the text. There is also a link to the "MIT Shakespeare Homepage;" click on "The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet" for a menu of links to each scene.)

- Point out to students that these lines make up a sonnet, followed by a sonnet quatrain. Review briefly the distinction between a Shakespearean or English sonnet, which divides its 14 lines into three quatrains and a couplet, with the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg;* and a Petrarchan sonnet, which divides its 14 lines into an eight line octave and a six line sestet, with the rhyme scheme *abbaabba cdecde.* Remind students that the sonnet form was developed by the 14th-century Italian poet Petrarch, who established the custom of presenting a problem, situation, or incident in the octave, followed by a resolution in the sestet. In Petrarch's work, these were usually problems, situations, and incidents arising from his love for the unattainable Laura, and when English poets began imitating Petrarch's sonnets in the early 16th century, they continued this thematic focus on the pleasures and frustrations of love. But English poets eventually developed a more flexible sonnet form which could be divided into octave and sestet, in the manner of Petrarch, or into three quatrain-length variations on a theme followed by an epigrammatic couplet.
- Ask students why a sonnet is an appropriate poetic form with which to bring the two lovers together in Shakespeare's play. What did poets typically use sonnets for at the time when Shakespeare was writing *Romeo and Juliet,* in the early 1590s? Provide students with a sample of Elizabethan sonnet writing to help them recognize the significance of Shakespeare's use of this poetic form -- for example, "Sonnet I" in Samuel Daniel's sonnet sequence, *Delia,* which was published in 1592 and is available through EDSITEment at the **Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet** website. (At the website's homepage, click on "Renaissance" in the menu at the left, then scroll down to the heading "Daniel" and select *"Delia"* for an electronic edition in Elizabethan spelling from the University of Oregon.) Call attention to Daniel's use of "conceit" in this sonnet. A conceit is an extended metaphoric comparison that establishes parallels between two seemingly dissimilar things or situations. Petrarch established the practice of including conceits in sonnets by using elaborate comparisons to praise his lady's beauty and portray his own suffering. In "Sonnet I," Daniel continues this tradition by describing himself first as a river drawn to the ocean of his lady's beauty and later as a business ledger in which his lady may see how much emotion he has invested in her. Finally, call students' attention to the name Daniel has chosen for his lady, "Delia," which is an anagram of "Ideal." Like most ladies in Elizabethan love sonnets, she is indeed a distant ideal, more inspirational than attainable, ennobling his verse with her virtue and beauty.
- Now have students look at what Shakespeare has made of these conventions in his play. First ask students to explain Romeo's conceit of pilgrimage: what is a pilgrimage? who is the pilgrim here? who is the holy saint? How does the conceit characterize the relationship between the two soon-to-be-lovers? How does the wittiness and word-play

appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)

National Standards for Arts Education

Theatre

2. Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and informal or formal productions (more)
4. Directing by interpreting dramatic texts and organizing and conducting rehearsals for informal or formal productions (more)
5. Researching by evaluating and synthesizing cultural and historical information to support artistic choices (more)
7. Analyzing, critiquing, and constructing meanings from informal and formal theatre, film, television, and electronic media productions (more)
8. Understanding context by analyzing the role of theatre, film, television, and electronic media in the past and the present (more)

View your state's standards

with which they develop the conceit play off against their metaphoric roles? To what extent is Romeo really the unworthy suitor of the sonnet tradition? To what extent is Juliet really the idealized paragon of virtue? Call students' attention to the balanced division of lines between them in their sonnet. How does this contrast with the poetic tradition of a lover addressing his unresponsive lady? Whose sonnet is this, in the end?

- Look finally at the "extra" quatrain that follows Romeo and Juliet's sonnet. How does the playful exchange of "sins" here look forward to the tragic outcome of the play? How does Juliet's closing, "You kiss by the book," reflect back on this little episode? What does she mean? that Romeo is following the sonneteers' recipe for courtship too diligently? that he is taking her words too literally? that his kisses are somehow make-believe, like sonnet conceits? How does her stepping out of their conceit with this line characterize her role in their relationship? How does it look forward to her actions later in the play?

2 As usual, Shakespeare's poetic artistry in this passage is only half the story. To explore the drama he has built into these lines, have two student volunteers act this episode, taking direction from members of the class.

- Ask students what actions fit these words. For example, what is Romeo doing as he speaks his first four lines? Perhaps more importantly, what is Juliet doing -- how does he catch and hold her attention? how does she react? what is the exchange of gestures in this first moment of their relationship? Have students experiment to find a way of playing Romeo's first lines that sets the stage for Juliet to enter into the conceit and extend it with her answering quatrain.
- Proceed in this detailed way through the remaining fourteen lines of the episode, encouraging students to draw from Shakespeare's verse the implicit stage directions for this key moment of his drama. How does he bring the relationship written into the imagery and word-play of his poetry to life on the stage? Are the lovers caught up in their conceit, or do they speak with a tone of self-awareness, using the conceit as a way of signaling their intentions to one another? Focus especially on the dynamics of the two kisses in the episode, the first marked by stillness ("Then move not"), the second by impulse ("Give me my sin again"). How far has the relationship moved between these two moments? How does this "extra" kiss reflect back on the elaborate build-up to the first one? How does it look forward to the impulsiveness that will lead to tragedy later in the play?
- Acting this episode brings out the importance of Juliet's closing line, "You kiss by the book." In the text, this can seem a throwaway; on stage, it is clearly the clincher. Have students experiment with a variety of ways Juliet might deliver the line, in order to notice how it characterizes her relationship with and attitude toward Romeo. (Her tone and manner might be anything from a dreamy "You really know how to kiss!" to a sarcastic "You've got a lot to learn about kissing.") Help students notice, too, that by giving her this last line, Shakespeare has effectively given her control over the episode, made her step out of their charade and comment on it. What does this suggest about her character as compared to Romeo's? What does it suggest about the tone and manner in which she should speak the line?

3 To gauge the full dramatic effect of the sonnet Shakespeare created for the first meeting between Romeo and Juliet, it is necessary to see it in the context of the action surrounding it at the Capulet ball. Have student volunteers take the roles of Capulet, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet, and the Nurse, and read the scene from Capulet's "Go to, go to!" through Romeo's couplet, "Is she a Capulet?/O dear account! My life is my foe's debt" (Act I, Scene 5, lines 84-120 in the Signet edition).

- Call attention to the fact that, while all these characters speak in verse, each speaks in a distinctive poetic style. Have students describe each style and explain how Shakespeare achieves it. What makes Capulet's speech seem naturalistic and near to prose? What makes Tybalt's pair of couplets seem exceptionally formal, almost posed, like a stage villain's aside? What gives the Nurse's short speech a prosy, talkative tone?
- As your student volunteers read through the scene, ask the class to note the effect of the shifts in tone that Shakespeare has built into it. How do the formal verse forms of Tybalt and the lovers stand off against the more naturalistic verse of Capulet and the Nurse? How do the verse forms of these younger characters in the scene stand off against one another? In what sense are the characters who speak in formal poetry spotlighted by their words? To what degree does the extended formality of Romeo and Juliet's meeting -- and their action within that formality -- deepen the poetic lighting of their moment together?
- Divide the class into study groups and have each develop a stage interpretation of this short passage in *Romeo and Juliet,* based on the dramatic effects Shakespeare creates through poetic style and verse form. Encourage students to imagine in detail how this stretch of action might be performed, to play out various scenarios in their discussions. When they have finished, have each group share its staging, and then debate as a class which ideas seem to capture best what Shakespeare aimed to achieve on the Elizabethan stage.

4 Conclude this lesson by having students work individually or in groups to find other moments in *Romeo and Juliet* where Shakespeare spotlights the action through poetic form and language. Students might look at the balcony scene (Act II, Scene 2), the bedroom scene (Act III, Scene 5, which is modeled on the aubade, a lyric of dawn-parting), the tomb scene (Act V, Scene 3), etc. Have students prepare production notes for their chosen scene, explaining how they would direct the action, with special attention to how they would have their actors perform the richly poetic language Shakespeare gives them. Should the characters seem exalted by this language? Should they seem always to not quite measure up to their high-flown words? Should they seem, like Juliet leaving Romeo at the ball, somehow independent of this poetic language, as if endowed with a life of their own?

Extending the Lesson

- *Romeo and Juliet* is an effective play with which to introduce students to Shakespeare's stage and stagecraft. For background, visit "**Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre**,"

the website of the New Globe Theatre in London, an exacting reconstruction of the playhouse Shakespeare's company constructed in December 1598. (At the **Mr. William Shakespeare on the Internet** homepage, click "Theatre" in the left margin, then scroll down and click on "**Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre**.")

- *Romeo and Juliet* is also a good starting-point for study of Shakespeare on film. Valuable Internet resources on this topic can be found at "The Shakespeare Classroom," developed by Prof. J. M. Massi at Washington State University, who offers a list of Shakespearean films and links to film sites. (At the **Mr. William Shakespeare on the Internet** homepage, click "Educational" in the left margin, scroll down and click on "The Shakespeare Classroom," then select "Shakespeare on Film" in the left margin.) Also valuable is "The Electric Shakespeare," a website created by Prof. Lawrence Danson at Princeton University, which highlights several film versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream, Henry IV Part I, Macbeth,* and *King Lear,* and also provides a useful online Handbook, with concise background information on Shakespeare's art and stagecraft. (At the **Mr. William Shakespeare on the Internet** homepage, click "Educational" in the left margin, scroll down and click on "The Electric Shakespeare," then select "Shakescenes" in the left margin for film highlights, or "Handbook" for the online background information.) Have students report on different aspects of a Shakespearean play on film.